

# Women's Political Participation: The Missing Half of Democracy

In a single decade, the world has gone through a political transformation without precedent. The Soviet empire collapsed in 1989, and 14 separate republics emerged from the rubble. Its former Eastern European satellites, having escaped the orbit of the Soviet military, are building new institutions of democratic government. Apartheid has given way to universally free elections in South Africa. Military juntas have yielded to popularly elected national governments throughout Central and South America. And although civil war still threatens in parts of Africa and Asia, recent elections in Nigeria and Indonesia are evidence that multiparty pluralism continues to supplant military dictatorships.

This global movement towards democracy is the geopolitical equivalent of plate tectonic shifts. But many emergent democracies have not yet stabilized. Their progress is neither complete nor irreversible. Constitutions, the rule of law, free elections, and universal voting rights are the institutional foundation of democratic government. But democratic societies require more. They require broad citizen participation in public decision-making. And anything that restricts political participation weakens a society's democratic foundation.

Among the most common and persistent barriers to more open political representation are the customs and traditions that relegate women to subordinate roles in public life. Whether imbedded in daily routines or codified in secular or religious law, these barriers limit women's opportunities, not just within politics, but throughout all of society.

USAID and other donors are investing in projects around the world designed to help women overcome the barriers limiting their roles in public life. These projects target every dimension of political activism. Some introduce basic political concepts to women unaccustomed to playing any role in public affairs. Others provide financial and technical assistance to help women's groups increase their memberships and expand their range of political activities. Still others train potential candidates for office to run successful political campaigns.

The scale of these investments is modest, but they will continue to bear fruit over the decades ahead. With each town meeting and election, the individuals and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) these projects support become more politically experienced. And as women increase their political activism, they will increase their influence over the pace and priorities of their country's future development.

The development path emerging democracies pursue will be determined in part by whether women gain greater access to the political arena. USAID's investments are helping expand the base of these democracies to include women's political participation. And the broader the democratic participation in these countries, the more their development choices will reflect the needs and interests of the whole society.

## Barriers to Women's Political Activism

Of the factors limiting women's ability to participate in politics, poverty is perhaps the most pervasive. Women carry primary responsibility for household and family maintenance. In both rural and urban communities, women of poorer families augment the income and food supplies with agricultural labor or informal employment. These dual obligations of household and paid labor leave most women with little time for politics.

Illiteracy further limits women's participation. In few countries are women's literacy rates equal to those of men. But even beyond basic literacy, information about political processes—which level of government to address for policies that respond to their interests, for example, or even how and where to vote—is often difficult for women to obtain. Trade associations, unions, political parties, and other organizations, the most common sources of this information, are inaccessible to most women.

Violence against women also restricts women's political activity. Where women raise their voices, challenge the authority of men, or devote time and resources to political activism, they often risk provoking the violent anger of male relations, neighbors, and community leaders.

Women who have access to information and who enjoy some protection against domestic or community violence are more likely to take advantage of opportunities for political action than those who do not. But even where poverty, illiteracy, and the threat of violence are endemic, women and women's groups have emerged in recent years as powerful agents for social and political transformation.

### From Social Movements . . .

Women's groups in Latin America have been leaders in human rights movements. Others have been in the vanguard of anti-war movements in Africa, Bosnia, and the Middle East, and leading advocates of social reforms in Asia, especially India. Their efforts demonstrate that barriers notwithstanding, women's political engagement is a potent force for social change.

Because women's organizations provide the basic infrastructure for political action, USAID works with local NGOs and informal associations to expand their range of

political activities, increase their memberships, and connect them with national or regional networks that can amplify women's voices in public affairs.

Some of these efforts focus on "legal literacy," introducing women to their basic legal and political rights. (See forthcoming Information Bulletin #4.) Others offer more advanced training to local community organizers, sharpening their leadership skills and providing instruction in modern advocacy techniques and communications strategies.

Women's groups provide a forum for educating both women and men about public issues and create opportunities for women to articulate their concerns and priorities. This is one of the functions of "civil society organizations," and USAID missions and bureaus support efforts to increase the number and variety of these organizations that focus on women's concerns. But while they provide the infrastructure for women's political activism, these groups alone cannot overcome the barriers that limit women's political legitimacy as candidates for political office.

### . . . To Political Campaigns

Many of the evolving democracies throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America have recognized the impediments that handicap the ability of women to compete for political office at all levels of government. Several countries have enacted election rules requiring a minimum number of elective offices to be occupied by women or requiring political parties to include women in their candidate lists. Models for these sorts of quotas can be found in many Western European democracies.

Electoral quotas were commonplace features of party elections in the former Communist countries

of Central and Eastern Europe. As these countries have moved towards open democratic government, however, they have abandoned these mandates, and the number of women holding elective office in the newly independent states has declined—sometimes precipitously.

USAID has supported efforts to increase the number of women office holders in countries that have recently embraced quotas and in countries that have recently abandoned quotas.

Peru and Russia provide two examples. Prior to its 1998 municipal elections, Peru enacted legislation mandating that women make up no less than 25 percent of the "party lists" identifying candidates for town councils and congressional offices.

USAID/Peru supported a variety of activities to increase women's involvement in the 1998 municipal elections, both as voters and candidates. Most of these activities were coordinated by a national umbrella group and implemented by four local NGOs.

These groups undertook national public education campaigns to explain the quota legislation and to identify electoral issues important to women. The Ministry of Women and Human Development provided Peru's political parties information on complying with the quota law and encouraged them to go beyond the 25 percent requirement.

NGOs, working specifically in Peru's poorest provinces and areas with the fewest women in elective office, also helped recruit, train, and promote women candidates in the local elections.

The 1998 municipal elections reflect the results of these efforts. Each of the country's political parties complied with the 25

percent female-candidate requirement. Women made up 30 percent of the ruling party's candidate lists. Voter turnout increased. More than 2,200 women were elected to Peruvian town councils, and the proportion of women among elected officials vaulted from 8 to 24 percent.

USAID's support helped provide invaluable political experience—and not just to the women candidates who campaigned for office. Local and national NGOs added to their experience of working with grassroots members and coordinating with other organizations. And USAID's technical and financial assistance in underwriting NGO election activities contributed to a dramatic increase in the number of elected women officials.

Quota systems were commonplace features of Communist Party politics prior to the collapse of the former Soviet Union, and a significant percentage of party functionaries were women. But quota systems have been abandoned in the post-Communist era, and women make up a much smaller fraction of elected officialdom in local and national governments.

In 1996, Russia's Congress of Women of the Kola Peninsula approached the International Republican Institute (IRI) for assistance in training women to stand for elective office or manage NGO advocacy campaigns for women's issues. USAID's Mission in Russia has worked closely with IRI to support party-building activities throughout the Federation.

IRI provided communications and management training to the congress. The following year, equipped with an IRI-developed campaign model and a grant of \$5,500, the congress trained women candidates for Mumansk City дума elections. Of the дума's 17 seats, 12 were won by women.



Presidential candidate Megawati Sukarnoputri (left) prepares to vote in Indonesia's first free election since 1955. The party she leads won a plurality in the June election and she is expected to become the next president.

USAID has supported similar efforts to increase the number of women office holders around the globe. In Thailand, nearly 300 women stood for local office in 1998. Of these, 193 participated in USAID-supported training for candidates. More than half of the participants went on to win their campaigns.

Working with the Philippine's Center for Legislative Development, the USAID Mission supported training projects in North Cotabato for women candidates. These "How to Run and Win Local Elections"

workshops proved effective. Of the 30 women who participated in the most recent training program, 27 went on to run in provincial or municipal elections. These candidates were joined by eight women graduates of previous workshops. Twenty-one USAID-trained women were elected to local offices in North Cotabato, 10 of whom had never sought public office before.

USAID's Global Bureau directs the Global Women in Politics Project,

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sponsored by the Democracy and Governance Center and implemented by The Asia Foundation. This project embraces the full range of democratic mobilization efforts throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The project supports voter awareness activities at the grassroots level to strengthen women's understanding of electoral issues. It organizes workshops to strengthen the capacity of women's NGOs to serve as advocates for women's issues. The project helps connect local and national NGOs into networks that more effectively advance women's political and legal rights. And it also helps train women candidates to run for office and women office holders to govern once elected.

As Mexico prepared for its 1997 congressional elections, for example, The Asia Foundation

joined with *Mujeres en Lucha por la Democracia*, a women's NGO active throughout the country, to convene a five-day conference on women's political opportunities. Of the 40 women who attended, 24 were nominated by five separate political parties to stand as candidates for Mexico's national legislature. Seventeen of these women won their races. The Asia Foundation has convened similar conferences in Asia and Africa.

### The Road Ahead

Whether the global democratic transformation that began a decade ago continues will depend largely on whether developing and transitional countries open their institutions of government and politics to women.

USAID's experience illustrates the success that some programmatic initiatives can achieve in increasing

women's political participation. And as women become more politically active, they will exert greater influence over the development decisions. One assumption underlying USAID's commitment to expanding women's political participation is that, over the long term, this will produce better development decisions.

The more immediate benefits of women's political participation are equally important. The broader the base of democratic participation in government, the less vulnerable these countries are to anti-democratic pressures arising from economic retrenchment and ethnic, racial, or religious animosities. Women's political activism strengthens these societies and improves the chances that evolving democracies will survive the years ahead.